INTERROGATING THE “NATIVES”: LEARNING, COMMUNITY AND THE DIASPORIC NATIVE

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Abstract

This study examines the interactive nature of learning between a community in a small Caribbean island and an African researcher. Relying on the works of such reflexive anthropologists, the study addresses the interactive nature of learning and reframes the subject/object division with the anthropological notion of “Diasporic native.” The questions under girding this autoethnographic study are: In what ways does the cultural familiarity between researcher and the researched enhance or hinder researcher learning from this experience and how are these lessons perceived to influence the work of a researcher and community educator? Preliminary findings from this study are: 1) for a Diasporic native researcher, history is embedded in the present; 2) the researcher is constantly negotiating his/her identity as he/she is claimed as an insider; 3) participating in the life of the community initiatives involves both giving and receiving and 4) observations made in the field make sense in the context of everyday interactions. The study concludes with implications for community researchers and educators.

Introduction

was born and brought up in Zimbabwe. From very early on in my life, I have known about Africans being taken from the continent to be enslaved in other parts of the world. Through history classes, mass media, etc., etc., I learned about the descendants of Africa in places such as the United States, Europe, and the West Indies. Films such as the US television production of Alex Haley’s “Roots” and songs by West Indian artists such as Bob Marley and Peter Tosh creatively connected the African continent with African descendants in other parts of the world. Recently, I had the opportunity to spend approximately two months working on a university research and outreach initiative in Grenada, West Indies. The project site is a rural community along the Northeast coast of the island. Grenada is a small island with a population of approximately 100,000 people, of which over 90% are of African descent.

My experiences in Grenada have had a major impact on how I perceive myself at both a personal level and a professional level. There was something about my physical appearance and mannerisms that was familiar to the people with whom I interacted and I, in turn, felt a sense of familiarity with this community. I was a stranger to this island and its people, and yet also very familiar. My status as a familiar stranger in this Grenadian community is captured well by the term “Diasporic native.” I am not a native of Grenada or this particular community, and yet because of the cultural familiarity observed and expressed by both the community residents and myself, I was assigned some level of “native-ness.” This experience aroused my curiosity about the ways in which cultural relatedness influences community work. In this paper, I reflectively explore the ways in which cultural relatedness in this Grenadian context shaped my interaction in this community. More specifically, I investigate what I learned from this cultural interaction and how it influences my work as a researcher and a community educator. The paper is organized as follows. In the first part of the paper, I will review relevant literature and discuss the conceptual framework guiding the study. The second part of the paper consists of a description of the study and presentation of thematic findings from my analysis of data collected

during fieldwork. The last section of the paper will discuss some implications of these findings for people engaged in community research and community education.

Literature Review

My library search for literature or studies done on this particular phenomenon yielded little in the way of relevant material. Using electronic databases, I searched for studies or reflection pieces done by researchers and other professionals working with persons with whom they are culturally related. My search led me to two sets of literature. The first is the body of literature written by African descendants from the Diaspora[1] who have made contact with the continent of Africa. The second body of literature is the interrogation of the concept of native/other as it relates to "native" anthropologists.

The literature I found written African descendants from the Diaspora responding to the African continent consisted of biographical accounts. In some accounts, the authors express a surreal connection with a particular country or village. Maya Angelou (1986) provides one such account when she relates an experience she had in Ghana. She traveled to Kete, a village near the shores of the Atlantic Ocean. Angelou gives an elaborate and moving description of how people in this village recognized her as one their own and how she recognized ways in which she and some other family members resembled the people in this village in appearance and mannerisms. Angela Fontanez De Fleming ((n.d.)), a Puerto-Rican-American who did field research in Senegal, provides a similar account. In Senegal, Fleming recognized aspects of her Puerto-Rican culture. For others, this recognition and connection does not exist. For example, Eddy Harris (1992), a Black-American spent a year traveling all over Africa. At the end of his journey through Africa, he concludes, "…for except in the color of my skin, I am not African…I am a product of the culture that raised me" (Harris, 1992, p.13). These biographical accounts reveal the complexity of the reaction of African descendants encountering the African continent. The literature does not shed any light on the conditions that make it possible to for one to feel this connection. Curiously, I was unable to find any material written by or about Africans from the continent making contact with African communities outside of the continent. While these biographic accounts were helpful in connecting my story to that of others, they did not go beyond describing the experience. An aspect notably missing from the biographical accounts I reviewed was the critical examination of how the connection or lack of connection influence the authors' interaction with the people with whom they felt culturally related.

The second body of literature reviewed interrogates the concept of native/other as it relates to "native" anthropologists. The works of anthropologists such as Narayan (1993) and Jacobs-Huey (2002) reveal the complexity of assigning the status of "native" or "insider" to researchers engaged in ethnographic work in communities where the researcher shares cultural similarity with the researched. While there is some debate about who is a "native" anthropologist, there appears to be general agreement that anthropologists working in culturally similar situations negotiate and experience different positionalities in the field based on their identity locations. This body of literature is helpful to this study because the question of insider/outsider and native/other as it relates to researcher identity is pertinent to my experiences in Grenada.

This study can contribute to the two sets of literature I have identified in several ways. First, it is a case study of an African person from the continent interacting with an African community outside the continent. Secondly, this study goes beyond describing the experience to an

[1] In the context of this paper, African Diaspora is to refer to African communities that exist outside the African continent.

analysis of the experience in the context of community research and community education. Thirdly, this study adds to the interrogation of notions such as insider/outsider and native/other.

Conceptual Framework

This research study is guided by Dewey's (1938) perspective on experience and education. According to Dewey, an educational experience has two principles: continuity and interaction. The principle of continuity maintains that in every experience a person encounters is connected to prior experiences and future experiences. We bring our prior experiences to the present experiences that will in turn influence our future experiences. The principle of interaction refers to the interaction of the subjective (individual characteristics) and objective (environment) in an educational experience. Following this conceptual model, this study assumes that my experiences in Grenada were connected to my prior experiences and influence my future experiences. What I learned from this experience at both a personal and professional level will influence my future experiences. One important assumption underlying this study is that Africa and African culture are socially constructed concepts (Berger & Luckman, 1989). While African people all over the world share much in common, it is my perception that there is no essential African culture (Mazrui, 2002).

Methodology

Returning to the university after the time in the field, it was clear to me that I had learned much from this experience. I was interested in gaining some understanding about the content and significance of the lessons gained from this cultural interaction. Based on this interest, the purpose of this research study was to investigate the following questions:

- In what ways does the cultural familiarity between the Grenadian community and me enhance or hinder my learning from this experience?

- How do I perceive these lessons to influence my work as a researcher and community educator?

The methodology employed to conduct this study can best be described as autoethnography. Autoethnography, as outlined by Ellis and Bochner (2000) and more specifically feminist autoethnographers such as Behar (1997) and Behar & Gordon (1995), is a type of qualitative research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural. Autoethnographers, with their dual identities of academic and personal selves, use their own experiences in a culture to reflect on self-other interactions. Employing all their senses, autoethnographers use the "self" to learn about the "other."

The "text" for this study was informal interviews and reflective field autoethnographic writing conducted during a fieldwork in a Caribbean island. The research was conducted during eight weeks over a period of six months. Informal, in-depth interviews were conducted with approximately twenty-five individuals working, or considering working, on a community-based education project. Analysis of this data is still in the preliminary stage.

Findings and Discussion

Four themes that have emerged from my preliminary analysis are discussed in the following section. History embedded in the present. My experiences in Grenada connected me to history as elaborated in the following excerpt:

In Trinidad, I met an 83-year-old woman. She assumed that I was Grenadian because, according to her, I look Grenadian. She would know too—she is originally from Grenada. So now, I was being claimed by a Grenadian outside of Grenada! When she found out I was from Africa, she started relating her connection to Africa. She talked about her grandmother who was a slave. She says her grandmother remembered her tribe (as it had been passed on her to her by her mother) and made tribal marks on each of her children so that they would remember where they were from. Her mother passed on the name of the tribe to her and her siblings but they didn't have the tribal marks. She said her being African was an important identity to her, one she never wanted to lose. I think I found it so moving because in this conversation, she had connected for me, my looking Grenadian to something much bigger than just familiar physical and facial features. She had connected her ancestors and my ancestors. I thought maybe if my grandmother had met her grandmother, they could have found out that they were from the same tribe. It was then, as it is for me now, an overwhelming realization. In this one conversation, this woman had created a unique link between us that existed in the here and now, but would not have existed without the past.

Much of the history of slavery that I am aware of points to people in the coastal areas, mostly from the Western part of the continent, being taken from the continent. While, it saddened and angered me, it still seemed somewhat removed from my ancestry. I have always assumed that the reason for this was that we lived so far from the coast and thus were less susceptible to slave traders, like places closer to the coast where there was more trading and so forth. Before my experiences in Grenada, I did not think of myself as a descendant of slaves. I thought of my ancestors as those who had escaped slavery. I no longer think that way. I now see myself as a descendant of slaves. My experiences in Grenada connected me to the history of my people in a powerful way. For a "Diasporic native" researcher such as myself, history is not something that took place in the past, but is embedded in everyday life.

Claimed while being denied. The study found that in situations where I was claimed as an insider, my status as an outsider was denied. For example, when I would be told, "you look like one of us [a West Indian]," it turned out to mean, "you do not look like one of them [Africans]." This revealed the tension and constant negotiation of my identity from situation to situation, as I was accorded insider/outsider status. Depending on the situation, my familiar appearance came with certain privileges and/or disadvantages. At times, it meant that I would be ignored or rendered invisible. Because I was claimed as Grenadian, I was denied some privileges accorded to my counterparts that were not claimed as Grenadian. An example of this is in the following excerpt from my field notes:

On a Sunday afternoon, our team went for a walk through the five villages, led by John. When we got to LaPoterie, there was a bunch of children playing in the street. One of the little girls came up to Paul and Katie (my two colleagues from the university who are both white) and said "hello tourists." John asked her, how you know they are tourists – what about her (pointing to me). The little girl put her hands on her hips and wagged a finger as she proclaimed, "she (meaning me) is not a tourist, she's black-black." Well, that summed it up right there. She saw me but didn't greet me because I was not a tourist.

The meaning of participation. On several occasions, I received lessons about the importance of receiving. On one occasion, the following occurred:

One afternoon, I was sitting on the porch (or gallery as it is called in Grenada) of the house we lived in. With me on this day were two young women from the community – Darlene and Wilma. I told the group that I need to do my laundry (we hand-washed all our clothes). Wilma said, "I

can do that for you Ms. Naomie." Without a second thought, I immediately said, "thank you for offering but I can do it. It's okay." The conversation that took place after that had a major impact on me. Wilma said that she had noticed this about me. I wasn't sure what she was referring to. She elaborated—she had noticed that I do not accept other people's help and yet I always want to help others.

On a different day, a similar occurrence went as follows:

I was hanging up my laundry on the clothesline at the back of the house. People passing by could see me and we would exchange greetings. One of our neighbors, Tom, was washing up at the standpipe. He asked me if he could help me with my laundry. I, as usual, said no thanks…I am okay. He said, I know you are okay but I would still like to help. I told him, there is one thing he could help me with. I told him he could get some mangoes for us (he had done this for us before). Tom said to me—that's not helping, that's doing you a favor. I asked Tom, what the difference is. The difference, Tom said, is that when you are helping someone, it is something that they are already doing or something someone needs to do but cannot do, but when you do someone a favor, the person is not usually involved. I again felt chastised for not being able to receive.

I would receive this lesson in receiving in many different situations in Grenada. I took it to heart because it is very easy for me to relate this to my own Shona culture. Receiving is as important as giving. A person who does not receive well is considered to have too much pride. I thought about this in the context of the community work. There is a problem if the giving is only coming from one direction. I was being reminded that being participating in community life means giving and receiving. Wilma and Tom were trying to remind me that giving and receiving should not be about need. It should revolve around being community, around being connected to other people. For researchers and community educators, participating in community life is not just about what they or community residents give—it is also about what and how they receive.

Meaning in the everyday. Observations made during fieldwork only make sense in the context of everyday life. Everyday life is not something a researcher observes, but rather, something the researcher experiences through daily interactions. These interactions are more meaningful when people relate with you, the researcher, as a person (as opposed to a particular role, such as researcher). My experiences working in this community often made me wonder: if people cannot relate to me as person, how would I be able make sense of what I observed?

Implications

The study suggests that ethnographic researchers working in communities need to rethink their roles in ways that go beyond the traditional subject/object, insider/outsider and native/other dichotomies. The findings from this study challenge the simplicity of such notions. The interactive nature of learning in communities necessitates reflexivity on the part of researchers and educators. Acknowledging that the "self" as part of the "other" blurs the subjective/objective division makes it important for adult educators and researchers to examine how this influences their practice.

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